

Production of a Christmas Tree Ship Play (to spark interest in Michigan's history and geography)

Grade Level: 4th grade

Main Subject Areas: Social Studies and Language

Description: One of the activities that my fourth graders really enjoy each year is writing a play about the *Rouse Simmons*, the famous Christmas Tree Ship that met its doom in 1912.

This activity integrates Michigan and Great Lakes history and geography with reading, writing, listening, and speaking! It is possible to extend this activity in many directions. A play is a great way of incorporating the many different ways that children learn. Several benchmarks from the Michigan Framework for Social Studies Education Content Standards and Benchmarks, including economics, can be followed by doing this activity.

At the point of beginning this activity, my students have already been exposed to basic Michigan geography, *Paddle to the Sea*, which I use as year-long hook to our Michigan curriculum, and the sinking of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*. They are quite comfortable with Writing Workshop and realize the importance of an audience for their writing.

Summary of the Christmas Tree Ship Story:

The sinking of the *Rouse Simmons*, better known as the Christmas Tree Ship, has become a legend in Lake Michigan maritime history. Each year in November, Captain Herman Scheunemann's triple-masted schooner, the *Rouse Simmons*, would sail down Lake Michigan carrying Christmas trees from places like Manistique, Michigan to be sold in the Chicago area.

On November 22, 1912 the *Rouse Simmons* sank in 180 feet of water near Two Rivers, Wisconsin, as the result of a terrible storm. Seventeen men lost their lives. Many in Chicago were very sad.

The story tells that Captain Scheunemann's wife purchased a new vessel, the *Oneida*, hired a crew, and continued the trips with Christmas trees for sale for many more years.

A diver discovered the ship in 1971.

Goal: The children will enhance their understanding of Michigan and the Great Lakes Region, particularly the areas bordering Lake Michigan, by writing a simple play about the Christmas Tree Ship.

Procedure: I think it is a good idea to present this activity just after Thanksgiving. It then becomes an activity that ties the curriculum to the holiday season. You can really "kill two birds with one stone."

1. **Introduce the Activity** (two to three class periods)

This introduction will help provide the background information the children will need to write the play. Note: *I do not tell the children anything about the ship or the play before we start.*

- Play the song "Christmas Tree Ship." Ask students what they think the song is about. "Who? What? When? Where? Why? How do they know? What makes them think this? (This can be done as a whole group or in small groups.)
- Chart some of the ideas.
- Present the words to the song. Any changes on the chart? Add or subtract information.
- Read the story aloud to the class. Compare/contrast the story with the song. (Use a chart or Venn diagram.)
- Read or pass out copies of the newspaper clipping about the diver who found the ship.
- Show the film about the *Rouse Simmons*.

Finally, if it doesn't come directly from the children, I suggest writing a play about the story. It often does come from the kids, though. Sometimes I suggest that, because there is no play, wouldn't it be neat if we could write our own!

Approaching the subject in this way provides enough background information to begin thinking about their own story. As we go along, we share any other information might learn about the ship.

2. **Orchestration**

Brainstorm with the entire class some general possibilities for the story. Usually quite a few ideas crop up, but the main interest is that the ship sinks!

Divide the class into three groups, one for each of three acts in the play. Act I will be the beginning, Act II the middle, and Act III the ending. (This is one way of starting. I'm sure there are a variety of ways you could initiate the writing.)

Have each group meet. The goal is to arrive at a general idea of what each act will include. Events should be in chronological order.

You will need to have a whole class meeting to work out any overlaps or gaps in the story. Sometimes this takes three or four sessions to accomplish! More research may be needed. I accumulate more information each year to have available in our classroom. Our librarian has included the book in our school library, and other information can be obtained via the internet.

Once the storyline is established, each group needs to work out characters and dialogue. Again, you may need to hold a whole class meeting at the end of each session for fine-tuning. Gradually a play takes shape.

Have the children write their ideas in play format. We have usually ended the play with our own performance of the "Christmas Tree Ship" song and sometimes, "We wish you a Merry Christmas."

3. Practice the Play

4. Final Touches

Make simple props, minimal costumes, invitations, and finally a program.

Eventually the play is a work of art and we invite other classes as well as our parents to watch our performance.

As you can imagine, every year the play is different from previous years, but each year has its special touches. The important thing to remember is that the children really take possession of their writing and are very proud of their work.

Other ideas:

- Maps made of the setting of the play.
- Journal entries made by each of the characters in the play.
- Letters written to family member of surviving crew members
- Math Links
 - Comparison of prices of Christmas trees today to those in the early 1900's
 - Estimate the cost of the cargo of trees; estimate the profit made by the captain for each trip
 - Find the distance the ship traveled each year to Chicago; the distance ship traveled before it sunk
- Posters advertising the play, welcome signs, etc.
- Discussion
 - Should Captain Hermann have begun the journey when he knew a storm was brewing?
 - What can happen to a family when they lose the person who is the bread-winner?

Some Ideas for Props

Use large boxes (refrigerator or bicycle boxes work quite well) for background. On one side of the box the woods in Manistique can be painted, another side can be the ship, and still another side can be the Clark Street Bridge. The students usually find some kind of hat for the captain. They like to make a ship's wheel out of posterboard. Axes for the lumberjacks can be made with paper towel rolls. One year we even had a three-masted schooner using wrapping paper rolls. What is needed depends on the slant the children put on the story.

Michigan Social Studies Standards and Benchmarks:

1. MI.SOC.I.1.LE.2 Place major events in the development of their local community and state of Michigan in chronological order.
2. MI.SOC.I.2.LE.1 Summarize the sequence of key events in stories describing life from the past in their loco! community, the state of Michigan and other parts of the United States.
3. MI.SOC.I.2.LE.2 Use narratives and graphic data to compare the past of their local community, the state of Michigan, and other parts of the United States with present-day life in those places.
4. MI.SOC.I.2.LE.3 Recount the lives and characters of a variety of individuals from the past representing their local community, the state of Michigan, and other parts of the United States.
5. MI.SOC.I.3.LE.1 Use primary sources to reconstruct past events from the history of the state of Michigan and the United States.
6. MI.SOC.I.3.LE.3 Compose simple narratives of events from both the history of Michigan and of the United States.
7. MI.SOC.II.3.LE.3 Explain how transportation and communication link people and communities.
3. MI.SOC.III.4.LE.1 Draw sketch maps of the community, region, and nation.
9. MI.SOC.IV.2.LE.1 Distinguish between natural resources, human capital, and capital equipment in the production of a good or service.
10. MI.SOC.IV.2.LE.2 Select a particular good or service and describe the types of resources necessary to produce and distribute it.

11.MI.SOC.V.1.1 Locate information about local, state, and national communities using a variety of traditional sources, electronic technologies, and direct observations.

Assessment/Evaluation:

Students will be assessed as they work with their groups on cooperative learning skills, Use rules for working in cooperative groups as a guideline, such as "staying on task." The group should be making progress on their final product--their part in the play.

Students can be graded on the written part of the play, based on the individual teacher's own grading scale, One grade can be given per group.

Grades may be given for map work, journals, math assignments or other extra activities that tie into the writing of this play.

A presentation grade may also be given to each student for their performance in the play. Each student should memorize their part. Each student should speak slowly, clearly and be easily understood.

Sources/Bibliography:

"59-year riddle is solved," *Detroit News*, Section G, December 12, 1971.

Murdock, Lee. *Folk Songs of the Great Lakes Region*. This audiotope contains Mr. Murdock's song, The Christmas Ship. 1989.

Neuschel, Fred. *August and Herman Schuenemann-Tree Captains of Lake Michigan*. Algoma, Printing Company, Inc., Algoma, Wisconsin, July 1993.

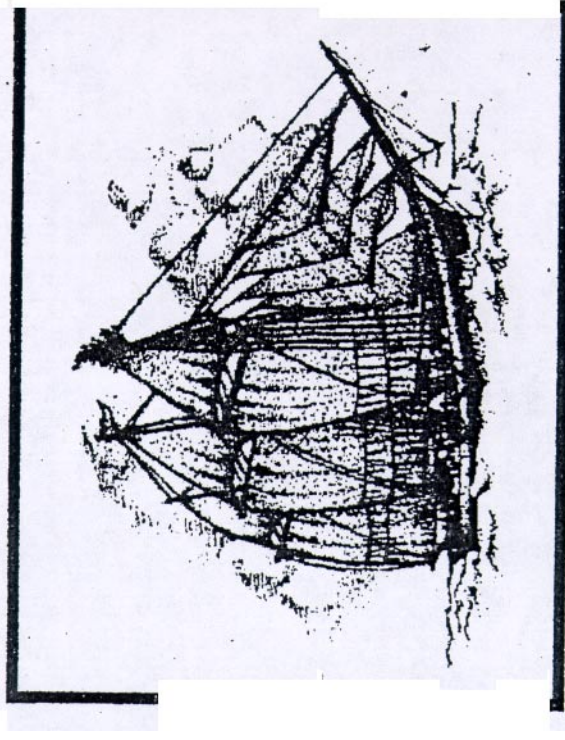
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United States Environmental Protection Agency. "The Fate of the Christmas Tree Ship," in *Great Minds' Great Lakes*. Great Lakes National Program Office, 77 West Jackson Blvd., Chicago, Illinois 60604, March, 1997.

Winter, Jeannette. *The Christmas Tree Ship*. Philomel Books, 1994.

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THE CHRISTMAS SHIP



Play performed by
____ Fourth Grade
December __, 2004

The sinking of the Rouse Simmons, better known as the Christmas Tree Ship, is becoming a legend in Lake Michigan maritime history. Each year, in November, captain Herman Scheunemann's triple-masted schooner, the Rouse Simmons, would sail down Lake Michigan carrying Christmas trees from places like Manistique, Michigan to be sold in the Chicago area.

On November 22, 1912 the Rouse Simmons sank in 180 feet of water near Two Rivers, Wisconsin as the result of a terrible storm. Seventeen men lost their lives. Many in Chicago were very sad.

The story tells that captain Scheunemann's wife purchased a new vessel. the Oneida hired a crew, and continued the trip with Christmas trees for sale.

A diver discovered the ship in 1971 and we have seen underwater footage of the Christmas tree ship on film.

The student love the song about the Christmas Tree Ship and so have included it in their play.

We hope you will enjoy the children's own version of this wonderful and inspiring story. They have worked very hard writing this play. We have learned even more about Michigan's history and a lot about what it takes to work together to accomplish a goal. like writing a play!

Welcome and Opening Narrator	
Act One-	
Scene One - The Woods in Manistique, Michigan	
Lumberjacks	
Capt. Herman Scheunemann	
Mrs. Barbara Scheunemann	
Scheunemann Daughters	
Scene Two - Clark Street Bridge, Chicago	
Mother	
Children and Friends	
Act Two – Northern Lake Michigan, the Rouse Simmons	
Capt. Herman Scheunemann	
First Mate	
Crewman	
Act Three – Clark Street Bridge, 1912 and 1913	
Mother and Children	
Western Union Messenger	
Bearer of Bad News	
Widow Scheunemann and Daughters	
Song-The Christmas Tree Ship	
Ending and Introductions	